

Sustainability's tough

by Jay Shepard, Solid Waste & Financial Assistance Program - HQ

Have you ever tried to quit smoking? I quit 25 years ago and have not looked back. And let me tell you, quitting that habit was a cake walk compared to my attempts at being a sustainable consumer. Is that an oxymoron?

I have been looking at how much we as a society and a culture consume and throw away. It is staggering. For me, according to the organization called Redefining Progress, I need 16 acres of the Earth's biologically productive land to support me. If everyone on the planet lived like I do, we would need 3.6 planet Earths to support us all. But not everyone lives like I do – the average American needs 24 acres. Yet there are only a little more than four acres per person available. Take the analysis yourself at <http://www.myfootprint.org/>

Do the math. Global population is past six billion, and the United States is at 281 million, or about 5 percent of the total. The available biologically productive land is 27 trillion acres. The U.S. uses 6.75 billion acres, or about 21 percent. There are only 2.3 trillion acres within the boundaries of this country, including areas with limited productive uses, such as water bodies and snowcapped mountains. That is only one-third the amount of land needed to support the American life style.

I would love to see data that would refute this. But sadly, all the many indicators we look at reflect the same story.

So, I go home, stopping on my way at the grocery store that is stocked mostly with items made and packaged somewhere else, buy my dinner and a few impulse items on the way out the door. At home, I flip on the lights, turn on the heat and cook my meal. Then I flip on the news and hear about the terrible inequities in life. Discouraged, I flip the channel to a Mariners game or a mindless movie, to help me forget about the real world I live in.

When am I going to do something about my footprint on the environment? I find myself using my old smoking-habit excuse, "Oh, I'll quit tomorrow, after this pack is gone."

But even when I look at these disheartening numbers and learn more about research that points to our over-consumption, I can't help but be encouraged that there are many of us taking our beginning steps on the sustainability road.

In a book called *The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices: Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists*, authors Michael Brower and Warren Leon point out three aspects of lifestyle it is important to look at and adjust to make valuable, sustainable changes in our lives. They advise us to pay attention to what we eat, pay attention to how we travel and carefully choose where we live.

While Brower and Leon advise us on [the most harmful consumer activities](#), it's not all about avoidance. There are plenty of things any of us can do:

- Choose a vehicle with high fuel efficiency.
- When possible, use transit options other than driving alone in your own vehicle.
- Eliminate consumption of beef and pork.
- Purchase organically grown, locally farmed produce.
- Purchase energy-efficient appliances and compact fluorescent light bulbs, and create an energy-conservation strategy for your household.
- Evaluate your heating and cooling needs, and replace old, inefficient heating systems and inefficient windows.
- Lessen the effects of home construction – remember to leave natural habitat.
- Minimize water use and be conscious of what goes into the sewer and down storm drains.

[LINK](#)

The Most Harmful Consumer Activities

Cars and light trucks – The manufacture and, more importantly, the use of consumer vehicles cause more environmental damage, especially air pollution and global warming, than any other single consumer spending category.

Meat and poultry – Meat and poultry production requires large amounts of water and causes 20 percent of the common (as opposed to toxic) water pollution related to consumer expenditure. It also uses a significant share of the nation's land – 800 million acres for grazing livestock and an additional 60 million acres to grow animal feed. Red meat causes especially high amounts of environmental damage for the nutrition it delivers.

Fruit, vegetables and grains – Irrigated crops grown to meet consumer demand use an enormous quantity of water – 30 percent of consumer-related water use. Pesticides and fertilizers cause 5 percent of consumer-related toxic water pollution. Food crops also use substantial amounts of land.

Household appliances and lighting – Electricity seems clean and nonpolluting when it's used in the home, but most of it is generated by burning polluting fossil fuels, especially coal (although this is not true in the Northwest). Appliances and lighting are responsible for 15 percent of the greenhouse-gas emissions related to consumer expenditures and 13 percent of consumer-related common air pollution.

Home heating, hot water and air conditioning – Cooling and heating homes and water have an effect on global warming and air pollution similar to that of appliances and lighting. Systems that rely on electricity or oil contribute heavily to both problems. Most fireplaces and wood stoves are especially high air polluters.

Home construction – The land and wood used for new homes are responsible for about a quarter of consumer effects on wildlife and natural ecosystems. Six percent of consumer-related water pollution comes from manufacturing the materials for new homes and disturbing the soil during construction.

Household water and sewage – Despite advances in sewage treatment, municipal sewage remains a major source (around 11 percent) of water pollution, especially affecting coastal areas and estuaries. Interestingly, household home-water use is only 5 percent of the total compared with nearly 74 percent for food production and distribution

-- from *The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices: Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists*